Hold to the Good
January 29, 2012

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 111
Micah 6:6–8
Luke 10:25–37

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."
Luke 10:27 (NRSV)

Go into the world in peace and courage.
Hold to the good. Honor all of God's children.
Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

(Based on 1 Thessalonians 5:13–22 and part of the benediction given by John Buchanan at the close of each worship service.)

Reflections

It is conventional wisdom in our family not to ask Dad a question of any substance unless you have a lot of time, because the answer can go on for a while. One son said one time, "Don't even think about asking him any question having anything to do with history, because he will begin with ancient Rome and work his way up through the Reformation, the American Revolution, the Second World War, and conclude with something about the Pennsylvania Railroad." And so I was delighted, and grateful, to be given a perfect way to begin my last sermon here when that very son told me a delightful story. He has two daughters, seven and four. Fiona, seven, apparently heard something on television about the Tea Party, which, I am sure, sounded to her—well, like a tea party. So my son, as I have done so many times, sat his little girls down for a little history lesson. He began with Boston in the 1770s and taxation without representation and the thirteen colonies and King George and how the people of Boston wanted to express their anger with the British so one night some of them dressed up like Native Americans and secretly approached British ships laden with tea in the Boston Harbor—at which point, Eliza, four, said, "OK, Daddy, you can wrap it up now."

So that is what we must do now. But I have one more story. You may have noticed that I receive a lot of sermon material from my grandchildren, and I believe I have found a way, shamelessly, to work every one of them into a sermon on one occasion or another—all but Alex. Alex is six, and he attends kindergarten at Washington Irving Public School in Oak Park. Right on schedule, as I was thinking about what I might say on this occasion Alex's mother sent me an email. She was reviewing with Alex his homework that had to do with Martin Luther King. She explained how before Martin Luther King, black and white children had to go to separate schools and couldn't eat lunch together or sit together on the bus. "What color are you, Alex?" she asked. And Alex, who is biracial, looked down at his PJs and said, "Red and brown with white stripes." Exactly. And a good introduction to one of the most striking stories Jesus ever told.

But first, a few reflections. After twenty-six-and-a-half years as Pastor of this church, my heart is full of gratitude this morning. Thank you for the privilege of it. Thank you for honoring me by joining me in this weekly exercise, of listening, engaging, sometimes arguing, pushing back, not always agreeing but always respecting, always engaged, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. Anyone who has tried to do this as long as I have learned long ago that preaching is not a solo performance but a collaboration between one person and a congregation and that it is the congregation, the gathered community, who bring their faith, doubts, hurts, joys and hopes and sit together in anticipation that the words spoken might contain a word from God. You cannot phone a sermon in. It requires a congregation.

Thank you for that. And thank you for allowing me into your lives at critical moments of birth, baptism, moments of high joy and celebration and moments of sickness, loss, and deep grief. There simply is no greater honor than that, nor is there anything quite like it anywhere else in the world.

Thank you for your commitment to mission, for making this place a light in the city, and thank you for being an extended family for Sue and me and our children and their spouses and our grandchildren. Thank you for your love and prayers, which we have needed and which have blessed us.

I have not been on this journey alone. There is one who has been with me every day, every step of the way from the very beginning: Caroline Sue Kearney Buchanan.

We have lived this life together from the day we drove from Altoona, Pennsylvania, to Chicago, Hyde Park, and began our life in a spare married-student apartment and I began my studies at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and Chicago Theological Seminary and she began her work as administrative assistant to the president of the seminary.

She typed my papers and, for years, my sermons, and at our first small church produced the Sunday bulletin on typewriter and mimeograph machine, and together we folded them on Saturday night.

She wore lightly but gracefully the mantle of minister's wife and the expectations and obligations that sometimes go along with it. She was and is, in her own way, a faithful Christian, participating in the church as her own person, doing what she felt called to do: sang in the choir, taught Sunday School.

And every Sunday she was in worship, not because of who she was married to, but because praise and adoration and gratitude to God are part of who she is.

And she gave birth to five wonderful children, our family, each of whom has become an amazing adult, wife, husband, mother, father. I am more proud of that than anything: that our family is intact, that they each are great parents and human beings with strong values and commitment, and they belong to and participate in their churches.

They are all here this morning, and I know you know them. Nevertheless I cannot resist showing them off one last time: Diane Buchanan, husband Rick Andrew, Dallas, parents of Caitlin, Cameron, and Carolyn; Susan Buchanan, husband Steve Brown, Oak Park, parents of Alex and Nick; John Buchanan, husband of Nancy, Chicago, parents of Rachel, Johnny, and Eleanor, members of Fourth Church; Andrew Buchanan, husband of Mary, Chicago, parents of Kate, Ella, and Lilly, Andy is a member of Fourth Church; Brian Buchanan, husband of Jillian, San Diego, parents of Fiona and Eliza.

Also I am so pleased that my brother William Paul Buchanan, Bill, and his wife, Lynn, from Wichita, Kansas. are here, and Sue's brother, Bill Kearney and wife, Sharlene, from Naples, Florida.

I know that she dislikes enormously being asked to stand up in church, but one last time: Carolyn Sue Kearny Buchanan.

And thank you for retirement events that now must feel to some of you like a marathon. When we began to think about how best to retire after twenty-six years, the Transition Planning Task Team we formed decided on the long model, extended over months, not the shorter, more abrupt way of doing this. The idea is that we all need time to adjust to change and that the adjustment could begin while I am still around, thus making for a smoother, more productive transition. It has worked. I know it worked because I have

heard regularly folks ask, “Are you still here? I thought you retired months ago.”

But the real gift has been a series of events that I have enjoyed immensely. In fact, this has been fun. A Cubs game in September and the thrill of throwing out the first pitch and then enjoying a spectacular night at Wrigley Field and a game, which the Cubs lost. That will change now, I know, because as my oldest son reminded us last Sunday at the congregational meeting, the entire Chicago Cubs enterprise is now led by a young, thirty-year-old Jewish man from the East, who just may be our savior.

The evening of music, with all our incredible musicians, playing and singing my favorite music, from J. S. Bach to a luscious rendition of “Tenderly,” from Tower Brass and children standing up in the pews, from the Morning and Children’s Choirs singing my favorite anthems, to Leszek Pytka and Richard Zurek presenting, with keyboard and guitar, “Bessame Mucho.”

Walter Brueggemann’s superb lecture the week before last will be, I’m sure, an important contribution to academic thought regarding what it means to be an urban church in the twenty-first century. And it was a thrill to see so many former colleagues who have shared their ministry with me over the years.

I began ministry as a student pastor in 1960, was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament upon graduation from Divinity School in 1963, and have had the privilege of serving through an amazing and important time in American history and church history. In 1960 the mainline churches, including the Presbyterian church, were still in the midst of robust growth. Our nation was at peace. Dwight Eisenhower was completing his term as president. The economy was good. In the Calumet region of northern Indiana, where I was serving at the time, there were five Presbyterian new church developments, all of them thriving. I was the organizing pastor of one of them, in Dyer. I have been a parish pastor through the civil rights movement; the bombing of an African American church in Birmingham, Alabama, on a Sunday morning that took the lives of four little girls and changed me forever; Selma; the march on Washington; the assassination of a president; Vietnam; the cultural revolution of the ’60s and ’70s; campus unrest; the unforgettable trauma of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent sudden focus on interfaith relations after 9/11; and for more than three decades, uninterrupted conflict in the church over issues of human sexuality. In the meantime, for a variety of complex sociological reasons, the mainline Protestant church presence in American culture was reduced by about half, while individual congregations, like this one, thrived and grew. And so, my sense, is that outposts like the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago will remain very important in the ongoing evolution of the role of religion in American culture.

I have high hopes for the entire enterprise, particularly here. I am so very grateful for the church staff I have been blessed to work with over the years. There is something about sharing ministry—daily—with people you admire and respect and love and simply enjoy being with; that has been a great gift. The current staff, led by Calum MacLeod, is, in a word, superb, every one of them, and they will lead this church with energy, imagination, intelligence, and love in the important time ahead. I have a dream and a fervent hope and a very personal request: Be here when the community gathers. Be here next Sunday—all of you! It will be a very important occasion. Calum will be in the pulpit for the first week, the first worship service in the next chapter of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago.

Last Tuesday and again Friday I took a tour of the Gratz Center, our new building, now under construction and under roof. I walked every inch of it and could imagine the spaces—the Commons, chapel, Day School, dining room, offices, and classrooms—full of people seven days a week, full of ideas and creativity and energy and love for God and neighbors and a passion to put that love to work in the world. There are very bright days ahead for the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. The transition ahead, while the Pastor Nominating Committee does its important work, can be a creative, robust time with the completion of the building and moving into it now just nine months ahead. I cannot wait to see that future and to be part of it when, after our new pastor is here and settled, Sue and I rejoin you on Sunday mornings in this blessed space to lift our hearts and voices in praise to God and to be part of this amazing enterprise, this light in the city.

Startle us, O God, with your truth,
and open our hearts and our minds to your word,
that hearing, we may believe, and believing trust our lives,
this day and all the days that lie ahead,
to your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On most of the Sundays of the past twenty-six years I have said, “Startle us, O God”—a prayer at the beginning of the sermon—and “Hold to the good,” at the end of the service.

“Startle us,” because religion can become routine even though it is about the stunning ideas that there is a God who created us and everything that is, that the world itself is full of the beauty and glory of its creator, that human beings are created in God’s image, that God came to live among us in the man Jesus and in him has promised to be with us and love us every day of our lives and beyond and to free us from anything that oppresses, confines, threatens, even the fear of death and death itself. Somehow we manage to make that boring. So I pray it because I, too, need the reminder that the world is alive with God, our God is a God of surprises and unlikely grace and blessed intrusions into our lives.

“Hold to the good,” because God’s love as we know it in Jesus Christ is always inspiring and enabling the good to happen in this world and because you and I are called by God to live out that love by doing good, promoting good, advocating for and voting for and giving our resources for and living for “the good” in the world.

In human history, religion has generally been about defining the holy, the sacred, and then designing ways to get access to it: obeying rules, performing rituals, sacrificing animals and enforcing taboos to guarantee that the individual is not unclean, unfit for the holy.

But our earliest tradition is that authentic religion is not so much about holiness and purity and piety as it is about goodness in the world. In ancient Israel, being holy and acceptable to God is, at first, a lot like other ancient religions: avoiding doing unholy, bad, taboo things, but then, with the emergence of prophets in Israel, religion slowly becomes about doing the good, holding to the good. Thus, Amos: “I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21). And with absolute clarity, the prophet Micah:

> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
> and what does the Lord require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

It was Hebrew prophetic religion that gave to the world the revolutionary idea that true religion has everything in the world to do with goodness, personal good, societal goodness, economic and political and social goodness.

One day a lawyer asked Jesus a question. It is not abstract. It is about how to have a good life, a full and authentic life, an eternal life: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That is the question every single human being asks:

“How can I live my life with meaning and purpose and some sense that my being here matters?”

“What does the law say?” Jesus asks, and the lawyer knows the answer. It’s right there in the Torah, the Bible: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind” (Deuteronomy 6:5) “and your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

“That’s it,” said Jesus. “Do that and you will live.”

The lawyer, being a lawyer, has another question, the key question: “Who, exactly, is my neighbor?” Preachers are typically hard on this lawyer. He makes an easy target. But it is a good question, not necessarily hostile. I think he really wants to know. I ask it of myself every day as I walk by half a dozen homeless people asking for help on Michigan Avenue. Jesus’ response is not an answer to the lawyer’s question at all. He never does define neighbor. What he does is describe what being a neighbor is, what loving a neighbor looks like.

It is the most familiar and most beloved story he every told.

A man travels down the rocky, dangerous road through the wilderness from Jerusalem, high on a hill, to Jericho, near the Dead Sea. Sure enough, he is attacked by bandits, beaten, stripped, robbed of everything, and left for dead beside the road.

Two religious officials, a priest and a Levite, see him, pass by on the other side of the road. We’re hard on them, too. But their religion, their definition of the good, required that they not come in contact with this man. If he is, in fact, dead and they touch him, the priest and the Levite will be ritually, religiously unclean, unfit for service in the temple, unable to do their jobs. So they pass by.

A Samaritan, a member of a despised race, with different religious beliefs and practices, despised by Jews—and the feelings were more than mutual—does the unheard of thing: stops, binds up the man’s wounds, anoints them, lifts the man onto the back of his own beast of burden, takes him to an inn, arranges for his keep, and promises to come back and pay the bill. In the process, Walter Brueggemann notes, he picks up a new adjective: “Good.” We know him as the Good Samaritan. That’s what it means to love your neighbor, the one who needs your help, needs you.

You cannot avoid the absolutely unique and radical idea here of religious inclusiveness. One of the functions of a religion has always been to define the boundaries of the tribe—who is in and who is out, who is friend and who is enemy. It is deeply embedded in us, and it has produced some of a

history's most deplorable incidents. Christian Crusaders slaughtering Muslims—and Jews while they were at it. Muslim's slaughtering Christian infidels. Catholics burning Protestants at the stake; Protestants, as soon as they could, returning the favor. Christian and Muslim militias squaring off in Sudan. Muslims attacking Christian churches in Egypt: Sunnis car bombing Shia and Shia gunning down Sunni in Afghanistan. Religion fueling ethnic conflict and tribal war and ethnic cleansing has been a historic tragedy.

But here is another idea, a better idea: a religion that transcends the boundaries and reaches out; religion that is "moved by compassion" and regards the other, whomever he or she is, as a beloved child of God, deserving of love and care and compassion and acceptance and dignity and freedom and full life—black-white, male-female, rich-poor, Muslim-Jew, gay-straight, Republican-Democrat, liberal-conservative. Goodness, according to Jesus, is having compassion for another human being, regardless of who he or she is, doing what is necessary to help.

What else are we here for, if not that? There is growing evidence that American culture is sick of religion that divides, judges, casts out, keeps out, and it longs for a religion that reconciles, affirms, accepts; a religion that simply, profoundly, in every way it can, "holds to the good."

I am wearing a cross around my neck this morning—three crosses fastened together—because of a time when this church and its pastor held to the good. After Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans found themselves in a difficult situation, objects of suspicion and outright hatred. A Japanese-Christian congregation here in Chicago had its lease cancelled in the building it was occupying and wrote a letter to the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Harrison Ray Anderson, asking for space to hold worship services. Anderson, a World War I veteran and staunch patriot, never hesitated, convinced the Session of this church that the good thing was to open the church doors and invite the Japanese Christians in. And so it happened. When there was opposition and anger at the church for sheltering the Japanese and threats to Japanese people coming to worship, Anderson himself stood on the Delaware sidewalk, with his robe and Geneva tabs and academic hood, and greeted and welcomed the Japanese people to worship.

After the war, to express their gratitude, the Japanese people took up an offering and gave the money to Anderson to buy something to symbolize the unity of the church. So Anderson, who was the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church General Assembly at the time, on a trip to Iona, Scotland, the birthplace of Celtic Christianity, bought these Celtic crosses to symbolize the three major strands of American Presbyterianism, which he labored long and hard to bring together. Ever since it has become the cross

the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church General Assembly wears during his or her term of office, a replica of which is presented when their term is over. It was my privilege to wear it in 1996–1997, and every day I put it on I thought about what it meant: the gospel of Jesus Christ that transcends boundaries of race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, boundaries of economics and politics, reaches out in love and reconciling grace to all.

Hold to the good. There are social and political implications here. And there are personal implications. I love something Krista Tippett, host of the NPR weekly program *On Being* said: "We will be measured, finally, not by our accomplishments, our professional achievements, our academic degrees, or civic awards; we will be measured, finally," she said, "by how well we loved."

As I thought about the parable of the Good Samaritan last week, a text I have preached on twenty times over the years, I turned to one of the first things I ever read about it, and maybe the best. It is by Helmut Thielicke, a leading German university intellectual in the '30s, a professor of philosophy and theology at the University of Tübingen, who was removed from his position by the Nazis and forbidden to teach because of his courageous critique of the Third Reich. A brave Lutheran bishop appointed him to be the pastor of the great Lutheran cathedral in Stuttgart, and he started to preach such strong, compelling sermons that the 4,000-seat church was filled every Sunday. When Allied bombing destroyed the cathedral, Thielicke continued preaching at different locations in bombed-out Stuttgart. In a now-classic sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Thielicke concluded:

> Let this last thing be said about loving our neighbor. All loving is a thanksgiving for the fact that we ourselves have been loved and healed in loving: we grow into all the mysteries of God when we pass on what we have received and when we learn by experience that a disciple of Jesus becomes not poorer but richer and happier in giving and sacrificing and that whatever of his feeble strength he puts at God's disposal comes back to him in twelve great baskets. . . . God is incalculable in the abundance of his mercy." (*The Waiting Father*, p.169)

"All loving is thanksgiving for the fact that we ourselves have been loved."

And so we come to an end and a new beginning for this great church and its people and for Sue and me. And we look forward to what lies ahead, for you and for us, with great confidence and hope and hearts full—overflowing—with gratitude.

For years I have kept close at hand and heart, knowing that the day would come to share it and end with it; an entry in Henry David Thoreau's diary, dated May 6, 1854:

> All that a man has to say or do that can possibly concern mankind is in some shape or another to tell the world the story of his love . . . to sing, and if he is fortunate enough and keeps alive, he will be forever in love. This alone is to be alive.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.